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HAMMOND (Wm A.)

MORBID IMPULSE.

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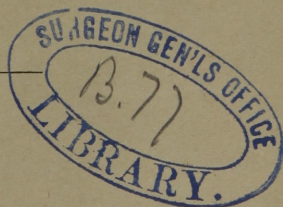
WILLIAM A. HAMMOND, M.D.,²

PROFESSOR OF DISEASES OF THE MIND AND NERVOUS SYSTEM IN THE UNIVERSITY OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK, ETC., ETC.

READ BEFORE THE

NEW YORK MEDICO-LEGAL SOCIETY,

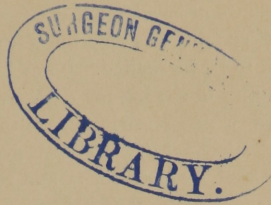
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MORBID IMPULSE.

By WILLIAM A. HAMMOND, M.D.

Read before the New York Medico-Legal Society, May 28, 1874.

It is related¹ of the Prince de Talleyrand that upon one occasion this great statesman told the following circumstance of his eventful life:

"I can never forget," said the prince, "that I was once gifted for a moment with an extraordinary and inexplicable prescience, which was the means of saving my life. Without that sudden and mysterious inspiration I should not be here to recount these curious details. I was intimately acquainted with my countryman Mr. B. We had always lived on the best terms, and in those stormy times something more than friendship was required to unite persons when the expression of friendship demanded almost a divine courage. I had no cause to doubt his affection; on the contrary, he had on several occasions given me the most devoted proofs of his attachment to my person and interests. We had together quitted France to take refuge in New York, and had hitherto lived in perfect harmony. Wishing to increase our little capital, I had freighted a ship, half shares with him, to try our fortune in the Indies. We were ready for our departure, but waited for a favorable wind with the greatest impatience. This

¹ *Hallucinations ou Histoire raisonné des Apparitions, etc.* Par A. Brière de Boismant. Paris, 1852.

state of uncertainty appeared to sour poor B. in a most extraordinary degree. Incapable of remaining quiet, he roamed the city with a feverish anxiety, which for the moment excited my surprise, for he was always remarkable for his calmness and placidity. One day he entered the room, apparently under great excitement, although he used great efforts to restrain himself. I was writing letters to Europe. Leaning over my shoulder, he said with a forced gayety: 'Why do you lose time in writing these letters? They will never reach their destination. Come with me, and let us make the round of the Battery. The wind may become favorable; perhaps we are nearer our departure than we think!'

"The day was magnificent, although the wind was high. I allowed myself to be persuaded. B., as I afterwards recollected, showed extraordinary alacrity in closing my desk, arranging my papers, and offering my hat and cane, which I attributed to the need of incessant activity, with which he had appeared overwhelmed ever since our forced departure. We threaded the well-peopled streets and reached the Battery. He had offered me his arm, and hurried as if he were in haste to reach it. When we were in the grand esplanade B. hastened still more, until we reached the edge. He spoke loudly and rapidly, and admired in energetic terms the beauties of the scene. Suddenly he stopped in the midst of his incoherent talk. I had disengaged my arm from his and stood firmly before him. I fixed my eyes upon him, he moved aside as if intimidated and ashamed. 'B.,' said I, 'your intention is to kill me; you mean to throw me from this height into the sea. 'Deny it, monster, if you dare!' The insane man looked at me intently with his haggard eyes for a moment, but I was careful not to remove my looks from him, and his eyes fell. He muttered some incoherent words and endeavored to pass me; but I spread my arms and prevented him. Casting a wild look around, he threw himself on my neck and burst into tears. 'It is true, it is true, my friend! The thought has tormented me day and night like an infernal flame. It was for that I brought you here. See, you are not a foot from the precipice. Another instant the deed would have been done.' The demon had abandoned him; his eyes were void of expression; a white foam covered his parched lips; the crisis had passed. I conducted him home. Some days of rest, bleeding, and dieting entirely cured him; and what is the most singular circumstance of all, we never referred to the occurrence."

Barbara Erkhov, a Russian peasant woman, twenty years old, was delivered of a son a year after her marriage. Two weeks subsequently her husband went to a neighboring village, leaving his wife at home with his mother. While Barbara was nursing the infant, the mother-in-law made a fire in the stove, and soon afterwards left the room. In an instant Barbara

seized her child and threw him into the stove. She then lay down on a bed which was in the chamber. Almost immediately afterwards her mother-in-law re-entered the room, saw the infant in the fire, and snatched it from the flames. The child died in her arms. Barbara could not explain her conduct otherwise than by declaring that she was suddenly seized with the impulse to throw her infant into the stove, and that she had done it without thought or cause.¹

These cases are sufficient to show what constitutes morbid impulse. It may be defined as a condition in which the affected individual is impelled consciously to commit an act which is contrary to his natural reason and against his normal inclinations.

It is necessary not to confound this state with others, which in some respects it resembles, but which are, nevertheless, quite distinct from it. Thus the person who under the influence of a delusion commits an act of violence against another, or himself, is not the subject of morbid impulse, for he acts in accordance with his reason, perverted though it may be.

A man, for instance, acquires the idea that some one of his relatives or friends is seeking an opportunity to poison him. The delusion grows with every moment of his life, and ere long dominates over his mind with terrible power. He lies in wait for his supposed enemy, and murders him. Such an act is not what is understood as being the result of morbid impulse. It is a deed growing out of intellectual processes logical in character but based upon false premises.

Or a person may imagine that invisible devils are endeavoring to destroy him, and to escape from his tormentors he commits suicide. In such a case he reasons from his supposed state of facts, and chooses an alternative which, under the circumstances, he believes to be preferable to continued existence.

Neither are the unconscious acts of certain epileptics the result of morbid impulse, though in some respects they bear a great degree of resemblance to those which are dictated by the condition in question. The element of unconsciousness is sufficient to distinguish them.

¹ Dagonet. Des Impulsions dans la Folie et de la Folie impulsive. *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, Sept., 1870, p. 238.

Marc¹ relates the following case: A shoemaker, aged 35, an industrious and sober man, rose early one morning and resumed his work. Shortly afterwards his wife noticed that his speech was irrational and incoherent, and suddenly the unfortunate man seized his knife and rushed furiously upon her in order to kill her. The neighbors restrained him, however, and thus prevented his murderous purpose. He turned upon them with his knife. His face was red, and his whole aspect was that of a maniac. Gradually he became quiet, but his pulse was full and frequent, his tongue dry, and the surface of his body covered with perspiration. In a few hours he was calm and asleep, and in the evening was perfectly rational. He had no recollection whatever of the events of the morning.

A Swabian peasant, who had for eighteen years been subject to epileptic paroxysms, experienced a change in the type of his disease, the fits being replaced by attacks of homicidal fury. The impulses to kill were preceded by somnolence and lassitude. When he felt them coming on he would beg to be restrained, and would implore his mother and others to get out of his reach. He had no subsequent recollection of his acts.

Many similar cases are cited by authors, and several very interesting ones are given by Trousseau.² A number of instances of like character have come under my own immediate observation. Two of these are referred to in another publication,³ but the following is of more recent occurrence.

I was consulted in the case of a young lady, an inmate of a fashionable school in this city, who immediately before each menstrual period was attacked with paroxysms of great and uncontrollable excitement, during which she attempted to destroy every object within her reach. In one of these, which had occurred just before I saw her, she had broken a large drawing-room mirror, a mantel-clock, and several valuable vases and ornaments before she could be restrained. One morning she en-

¹ *De la Folie considérée dans les Rapports avec les questions Médico-Judiciaires*, ii. p. 510.

² *Clinique Médicale*. Art., Congestion Apoplectiforme Cerebrale.

³ *A Treatise on Diseases of the Nervous System*. New York. Fourth edition, 1873.

tered my consulting-room with her governess, and almost before I could speak to her the fit seized her. Her face and neck became red, her eyes sparkled, she trembled from head to foot, and ere I was able to prevent her, she grasped a bronze, dagger-like paper-knife that lay on my table, and attempted to plunge it into her breast. Fortunately it struck in the steel support of her corsets, and before she could repeat the act, I caught her arm and took the weapon from her. In a few moments she was calm, and had no recollection of what she had done. The attack was clearly epileptic in character, and shortly afterwards her seizures assumed the regular form of the *grand mal*.

In true morbid impulse the individual who is its subject is perfectly aware of the incongruous act he is about to commit, but perpetrates it because he is compelled thereto by a force which he feels himself powerless to resist. He acts calmly and deliberately very often, but again manifests agitation and excitement. He does not for a moment lose consciousness, and when his impulse has been acted upon, or his purpose changed by any for the instant more powerful cause, he recollects distinctly all the circumstances of the occasion.

It frequently happens that the patient struggles successfully against these impulses which he experiences even when on the very point of yielding, or he takes such measures of prevention as are sufficient for the purpose, or the impulse disappears apparently spontaneously or as a consequence of appropriate medical treatment.

Georget¹ relates the case of a woman, the wife of a shoemaker, who felt herself impelled to murder her four children. She sought medical advice for a disease which, as she said, was driving her to despair. She had the appearance of health, slept well, was regular in her menstrual function, had no pain and no disturbance of the circulation. But she complained of being subject to a morbid impulse to kill her children, although she declared that she loved them better than she did herself. When the paroxysm was at its highest her face became red and she trembled violently. She was cured by the use of baths, valerian, and a blister applied between the shoulders.

¹ Discussion Médico-Legale sur la Folie, etc. Paris, 1836.

The same author quotes from Michu the following case:¹

"A countrywoman, twenty-four years old, having simple manners and good habits, but rather taciturn, was safely delivered of her first child ten days previously, when she suddenly, while looking at it intently, experienced a desire to strangle it. The idea of such a thing made her shudder with horror. She placed the infant in its cradle and rushed out of the house, hoping to divert herself from her fatal impulse. Returning home to nurse her child, she again experienced the sensation of being forced to kill it. Again she left the house, and going to the church prayed to be delivered from the sin of murder. Soon afterwards she met the priest, who, being a sensible man, advised her to consult a physician, and in the meantime promised to watch her. Michu was consulted. He observed nothing abnormal in the appearance of the woman. When asked if she loved her baby, she replied: 'I know well that a mother ought to love her child; if I do not love mine it is not my fault.' Michu very wisely insisted on removing the child from her, and in the course of a few days the impulse disappeared."

Very slight causes are often sufficient to destroy or overcome the morbid impulse. Marc² cites the case of M. R., a distinguished chemist and an amiable man, who feeling himself compelled to commit murder, and fearing his inability to resist, voluntarily placed himself in a *maison de santé* of the faubourg St. Antoine. Tormented by the desire to kill, he often prostrated himself before the altar and implored the Almighty to deliver him from his atrocious impulse, the origin of which he could not explain. When he felt that his will was yielding, he went to the superintendent of the asylum, and had him tie his thumbs together with a ribbon. This weak band was sufficient to calm the unfortunate man for a time; but eventually he attempted to kill one of his keepers, and finally died in a paroxysm of acute mania.

Again, all the efforts of the affected individual are apparently unsuccessful, and the fatal deed is committed. I say *apparently*, because we never can be sure that the patient has exercised all his will power. When he effectually resists, there are not wanting those who will declare that the case is not one of morbid impulse; while, when he yields, at once or eventually,

¹ Op. cit. p. 50.

² Consultation Médico-Legal pour Henriette Cornier, ect.

these same persons will just as strongly affirm that the impulse was irresistible. Several cases have come under my observation in which patients have confessed to me that they have had impulses to commit various kinds of crimes, which they have been barely able to resist. These people have passed through life attending faithfully to their several duties, and entirely unsuspected of contending with themselves in so terrible a manner.

A few weeks ago a young man consulted me for symptoms indicating cerebral congestion. He had pain in his head, dizziness, and was unable to sleep. He informed me that he had been for several months constantly troubled by a force, which was inexplicable to him, to kill a friend, who was employed in the same office with him. Upon one occasion he had gone so far as to secretly put strychnia into a mug of ale, which he had invited the young man to drink; but, just as the intended victim was raising the vessel to his lips, he had, as if by accident, knocked it out of his hand. Every morning he awoke with the impulse so strong upon him that he felt certain he would carry it out before the day closed; but he had always been able to overcome it.

This young man reasoned perfectly well, in regard to his impulse, and very candidly admitted, and I entirely agreed with him, that if he had yielded and committed the murder, he ought to have been punished to the full extent of the law.

The following extract from a letter which I recently received is likewise to the point:

"In the New York *Sun* of the 30th inst. I noticed the proceedings of the Medico-Legal Society, in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, on emotional insanity, etc., and I was impressed particularly with your remarks on 'Morbid Impulse.' Some two weeks since I was at work in my garden, with a spade, and one of my little girl children, just three years old, came in where I was, and I was suddenly seized with an impulse to kill the child with the spade that I was at work with, and in order to prevent my doing so I had to make her leave the garden. Now, I love this child better than I do the apple of my eye, and why I was seized with that impulse I can't say. Since that time I have been feeling strange, and I am afraid to trust myself with my own family, though I know perfectly well what I am doing, and only feel actuated by these impulses. I have consulted a physician, and he laughed at me. If you can suggest any

remedy for these strange impulses, I will pay you what you charge, and will consider that you have done me a favor that will *cause me to bless your name forever*. I don't consider that I am in any danger of murdering any one just yet: but the idea of such a thing is horrible, and I fear it may grow on me unless remedied."

In my reply I called his attention to the admitted fact that he had his impulse under control; that he was able to reason calmly and intelligently in regard to it; that he had applied to me for advice, and that I urged him, without delay, to place himself under the restraint of an asylum. I further told him, that if he disregarded this advice, and finally yielded to his impulse, he would be fully as guilty of murder as if he had killed through deliberate malice, and that he ought to be just as surely executed as any other murderer.

It not infrequently happens that so far from the individual attempting to combat his morbid impulses, he takes positive pleasure in obeying them, and in perpetrating crimes remarkable for their cruelty and for their apparently motiveless character. He may thus, in the gratification he experiences, entirely lose sight of the original excitation. As Ray¹ says.

"The sentiments of truth, honor, honesty, benevolence, purity, have given place to mendacity, dishonesty, obscenity, and selfishness, and all sense of shame and self-content has disappeared, while the intellect has lost none of its usual power to argue, convince, please, or charm. I once asked a patient who was constantly saying or doing something to annoy or disturb others, while his intellect was apparently as free from delusion or any other impairment as ever, whether in committing his aggressive acts he felt constrained by an irresistible impulse, contrary to his convictions of right, or was not aware at the moment that he was doing wrong. His reply should sink deep into the hearts of those who legislate for, or sit in judgment on, the insane. 'I neither acted from an irresistible impulse, nor upon the belief that I was doing right. I knew perfectly well I was doing wrong, and I might have refrained if I had pleased. I did thus, and so, because I loved to do it. It gave me an indescribable pleasure to do wrong.' Yet this man, when well, is kind and benevolent, and in his whole walk and conversation a model of propriety."

A few years ago a young man was arrested in this city for assaulting a young lady in the street. He was identified as a

¹ A Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity. Fifth Edition. Boston, 1871, p. 223.

person who had committed many previous offences of a like character. His plan was to rush up to a lady, seize her, throw her down, and take off her shoes, which he carried away with him. He did not attempt otherwise to injure her, or to take away any other article from her. On searching his trunks and drawers, they were found full of women's shoes. He said he had no use for them, and was actuated by an irresistible impulse which it was pleasant for him to gratify.

Dr. Dickson states¹ the case of the son of a gentleman, in a high position, who was sent away from school because he stole. Among the things which he confessed to having stolen were blankets and sheets, which he took off his own and other boys' beds, clothing, and a variety of articles, amongst which were two pairs of plated nut-crackers, which he sold for a shilling a pair. On asking him if he wanted the money, he said no, that he had plenty of money; but that he felt something he could not describe enjoining him to take the things. He was greatly distressed, but he declared that he could not control himself, so irresistible was the impulse; and he then admitted that the day before Dr. Dickson saw him he had stolen some jewelry from his father, although, when first charged with the theft, he had stoutly denied it. His impulse was simply to take; after he had possessed himself of many of the things he did not know what to do with them, and attached no value to them. The jewelry he stole he simply treated as toys. Some of the articles he stole at school he hid in a garden, and others he sold. It appeared that he disposed of them merely to rid himself of their encumbrance. He felt that the things had been stolen, and must be got rid of some way, and the readiest way was that of selling them.

In 1828 Papavoine killed, in the forest of Vincennes, two little boys, who were there on a holiday with their mother. He had never seen these children before, and when seized with the impulse to kill them, went and bought a knife for the purpose; returning, he murdered them, before their mother's eyes, and made his escape. On being arrested and identified, he at first

¹ The Science and Practice of Medicine in Relation to Mind, etc. London, 1874, p. 433.

similar instances—also illustrates the force of habit. This man, a peasant of a low order of intellect, had a *penchant* for murdering servant-girls, whom he pretended to hire, and then conducting them to unfrequented places put them to death. Six thus disappeared, and nine others barely escaped. Indeed it is probable that many more than these were murdered, for on searching his premises twelve hundred and fifty articles of woman's apparel were found, of which only fifty were identified. As some one said at the time, Dumollard ought to have had a cemetery of his own. And yet there was no such motive for his crimes as would adequately account for them. He did not sell the clothing and other things of little value which he obtained from his victims. Indeed it was shown that he had burned and otherwise destroyed many of them, and the rest were, as I have said, hidden in out-of-the-way places about his dwelling. There was no evidence to show that he had outraged any of those whom he had murdered, and he was found not guilty of the accusation to this effect. He appears to have been wholly actuated by morbid impulse and the force of habit,—a habit which had become a portion of his physical being, and which it afforded him pleasure to indulge. Insanity was urged in his defence, but he was found guilty and was executed.

Many other cases might be brought forward, some of them of recent occurrence, and belonging to this country; but I must close this part of my memoir with a reference to but one other, that of Jesse Pomeroy, the boy murderer of a few days ago.

As many here to-night will call to mind, about two years since there was great excitement in Chelsea, near Boston, over a number of horrible instances of cruelty perpetrated on little children. The victims were tortured in various ways, sometimes by being cut with knives in various parts of their bodies; again by being tied to beams and beaten with ropes and sticks till their bones were broken or their teeth knocked out; and again by having pins and needles run into sensitive parts of their bodies, upon which salt water was afterwards poured. Pomeroy, a boy about fourteen years old, and the son of a respectable widow woman, was ascertained to be the perpetrator, after about a hundred other boys had been arrested on suspicion. When arraigned he

admitted his guilt, and could only plead in his defence that he "could not help it." He was convicted and sent to the House of Refuge. After remaining there a year and five months, he was, at the earnest request of his mother, and furthermore, in view of his good conduct while in confinement, pardoned, and on the 6th of February of the present year he returned home. On the 22d of April, a little fellow named Horace Mullen, and the son of a poor cabinetmaker, was found dead in the Dorchester marshes. The body was horribly mutilated, the head was nearly severed from the trunk, and about thirty stabs were found in different parts of the body.

Jesse Pomeroy was at once suspected as the murderer. On examination a knife spotted with blood was found on his person, another spot on the breast of his shirt, and his boots were covered with mud like that found in the marshes. Upon repairing to the place where the body was found, the officers discovered footprints which corresponded with those made by Pomeroy's boots. When confronted with the body of the murdered child, Pomeroy trembled all over and turned away his head.

"Did you know that little boy?" inquired the officer.

"Yes, sir; but I don't want to look at him any more."

"Did you kill him?"

"I suppose I did."

"How did you get the blood off the knife? Did you wash it?"

"No, sir; I stuck it in the mud."

He further said that if he did the deed he was sorry for it, and hoped his mother would not know of it. When asked by the officer what he thought ought to be done with him, he replied, and his answer ought to sink deeply into the hearts of all judges, jurymen, and lawmakers,

"Put somewhere, so I can't do such things."

These cases are sufficient to show the nature of morbid impulse. There are hundreds of others which I might have brought forward, with many of which you are doubtless familiar; but I preferred to cite a few striking instances which are not commonly quoted. A few additional points relative to mor-

bid impulse, and especially in regard to its psychical cause, require some notice. The first of these is *suggestion*. The action of this principle is well shown in the following case :

A young man, a member of a highly respectable family, consulted me for what he called insanity. It appeared that a few weeks previously, while walking down Broadway he had been struck with the appearance of a lady in front of him, who wore a very rich black silk dress. Suddenly the impulse seized him to ruin this dress by throwing sulphuric acid on it. He therefore stopped at an apothecary's shop, and purchased a small vial of oil of vitriol. Hastening his pace, he soon overtook the lady, and walking by her side he managed in the crowd to empty his vial over her dress without being perceived. He derived so much satisfaction from this act that he resolved to repeat it at once. He therefore purchased another supply of vitriol, and singling out a lady better dressed than others around her, poured the contents of the vial over her dress, and again escaped detection. He then went home and reflecting upon what he had done, determined to persevere in the practice ; but a night's rest put him in a healthier frame of mind, and he concluded to abandon the idea. Indeed he was so distressed by what he had already done, that he wrote out an advertisement for the newspapers, in which he requested the ladies whose dresses he had spoiled, to reply through the same channel, giving their residences, so that he might recompense them for the loss he had caused them to sustain. But on his way to the newspaper offices he again felt the impulse at the sight of a handsome dress to throw vitriol on it, and again he purchased a supply and repeated the act of the day before.

He now began to consider more fully than he had yet done the nature and consequences of his conduct, and the next morning came to me for advice. He stated very frankly his entire conviction that his acts were in the highest degree immoral and degrading, but expressed to me his utter inability to refrain.

"A handsome dress," he said, "acts upon me very much as I suppose a piece of red cloth does on an infuriated bull ; I must attack it. The bull uses his horns while I use vitriol. I do not

know why the idea ever came into my head. I certainly should never have conceived of such a thing if I had been blind. I was altogether excited by the sight of that handsome black silk dress the first day, and it was impossible for me to resist it after it once had a lodging in my mind. But I have often seen fully as handsome dresses in the street before, but never previously was the sight followed by such an impulse."

Upon the most careful examination I could discover no evidence of disease anywhere, except in the one point of wakefulness, with which he had suffered more or less for several months past. I therefore prescribed bromide of calcium for him, and insisted on his removing himself from further temptation by taking a sea voyage in a sailing vessel upon which there were no women passengers. He at once expressed his acquiescence in my views. He went to sea in a fishing schooner, and returned in three or four months perfectly free from his morbid impulse.

A gentleman who came about once a week to consult me for cerebral congestion, the result of excessive application to business, and who lived in a neighboring town, informed me that during his journeys by rail he invariably experienced an impulse to throw himself from the train. Finally he was so strongly impelled that he stated the case to an acquaintance in the cars, and begged him to sit near him, and restrain him, if he made any such attempt. After that he never came without bringing a friend with him, who had instructions not to lose sight of him for an instant. In telling me of his impulse he described it as almost overwhelming, and that it seemed to be excited by the rapid motion, and by the fact that he had heard of people throwing themselves from railway trains.

It is well known that persons standing on great heights often experience an impulse to jump off. So many individuals committed suicide by leaping from the *Colonne Vendôme* and *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris, and from the Duke of York's Monument in London, that precautions had to be taken to prevent further acts of the kind.

Marc relates the case of a nurse who felt the impulse to murder the infant she took care of, whenever she saw its naked skin. She threw herself on her knees before her mistress, and

begged to be discharged, declaring that the whiteness of the child's skin excited her to murder it, and that she could no longer resist the impulse.

Several years since, I had a lady under my charge who, whenever she saw the naked shoulders of a young child felt an impulse, which she declared she could not resist, to bite the skin. She had thus inflicted very disagreeable wounds on the children of her friends, and was finally arrested on the charge of assault, but the matter was hushed up on her promise to abstain, and she kept her promise.

Morbid impulses are often excited by the sight of a suitable weapon with which an act of violence may be committed. Persons have hanged themselves on the suggestion of seeing a rope; others have committed murder or suicide from seeing knives, pistols, etc. Even a word spoken in jest may be sufficient. Dr. Oppenheim, of Hamburg, having received for dissection the body of a man who had committed suicide by cutting his throat, but who had done this in such a manner that his death did not take place until after an interval of great suffering, jokingly remarked to his attendant, "If you have any fancy to cut your throat, don't do it in such a bungling way as this; a little more to the left here, and you will cut the carotid artery." The individual to whom this dangerous advice was given was a sober, steady man, with a family and a comfortable subsistence. He had never manifested the slightest tendency to suicide, and had no motive to commit it. Yet, strange to say, the sight of the corpse and the observation made by Dr. Oppenheim suggested to his mind the idea of self-destruction, and this took such firm hold of him that he carried it into execution, fortunately, however, without profiting by the anatomical instruction he had received, for he did not cut the carotid artery.

Closely allied to suggestion, and probably a more powerful cause of morbid impulse, is *imitation*. Thus many crimes have been committed by persons who have had this impulse excited by reading accounts of the trials of other persons, or the detailed recitals of all the particulars of offences which the age requires the public press to contain. Epidemics of murder, suicide, arson, and other crimes are thus produced. "Some years

ago," says Dr. Forbes Winslow,¹ "a man hung himself on the threshold of one of the doors at the Hôtel des Invalides. No suicide had occurred at the establishment for two years previously; but in the succeeding fortnight five invalids hung themselves on the same cross-bar, and the governor was obliged to shut up the passage."

Epidemics of suicide spread, according to Plutarch, among the women of Miletus, and, as is well known, in later days among the young women of Marseilles.

A careful attention to the cases of suicide recorded in the daily newspapers of a large city shows that they are largely influenced in character by the principle of imitation. A case of suicide by Paris green is published, and straightway half a dozen others due to this poison are the result. Or a man or woman jumps from a ferry-boat while it is crossing the river, and then this mode becomes the fashion for a while, to be followed in its turn by some other method.

When I was a medical student of the University of New York, a young gentleman from Georgia was on one occasion dissecting the same body that I was. He had drawn one of the lower extremities as his part of the subject, and he was assiduous and careful in his duties. So far as my observation of him extended, he did not differ essentially from other medical students. He was cheerful in disposition, and gave no evidence whatever of mental derangement, or even of excitement or depression of mind. One morning we were told that he had been found dead on the floor of his bedroom, and examination showed that he had divided his femoral artery, and had died from hemorrhage. It was then ascertained that he had, the evening before, received a letter which had apparently caused him much unhappiness.

Now, suicide from division of the femoral artery is certainly a very unusual mode of self-destruction. I doubt if any case of the kind had previously occurred in New York. Yet within a week there were two others, one of which was Horace Wells, the alleged discoverer of the anæsthetic properties of sulphuric ether.

Here we have the principle of suggestion acting on the first victim, and then that of imitation on the others.

¹ *The Anatomy of Suicide.* London, 1840, p. 120.

Imitation is of more force when the intellect is less fully developed. Even in the normal condition we find it more strongly exercised in children and women than in adult men. In the former the influence may be so powerful that actual disease is acquired. Thus a child imitates the movements of another affected with chorea or with stammering, and immediately acquires the disorder. Even squinting has been contracted in this manner.

A lady had received such a vivid impression at seeing her maid throw herself down a well, that she never passed a well without feeling a strong impulse to throw herself into it.¹

An idiot, after having killed a pig, felt impelled to kill a man, and obeyed the impulse on the first one he met.

A melancholic person was present at the execution of a criminal, and was immediately seized with an impulse, of which he was fully conscious, and could scarcely resist, to murder some one.

A child six years old strangled its younger brother. The father and mother entering the room at the moment the act was in process of accomplishment, demanded the cause. The child threw itself, weeping, into their arms, and answered that it was imitating the devil, whom it had seen strangle punchinello.

Such cases as these are at least of value if they cause us to recognize the force of the principle of imitation, and to render less public than they are now the executions of criminals and the slaughter of animals.

In the month of February, 1846, three hundred and fifty French soldiers were encamped together in Algiers, when one of them wounded himself in the wrist. Within twenty days thereafter thirteen others had injured themselves in precisely the same manner. The commandant, frightened at this series of mutilations, removed his camp to a distance of eight leagues; but what was his astonishment to find that within a week eight others had voluntarily wounded themselves in the same way.

As is well known, Henriette Cornier had an impulse to kill a child of which she had the care. She obeyed the impulse, and after the publication of the trial six cases, as Esquirol informed Prichard, of homicidal impulse were directly

¹ Gall. *Fonctions du cerveau et de chacune de ses parties*. T. x. p. 199.

traced to that one act. In his work on insanity he refers to two others of similar origin.

The well-known tendency of many women to become affected with hysteria at the sight of another suffering from a paroxysm of the disease, and the similar fact of the extension of epidemics of demonomania, trance, ecstasy, the impulse to mew like a cat or to bleat like a sheep, and, it may be added, crusading, both of mediæval and of more recent times, may also be cited as illustrations in point.

The influence of *habit* in fostering a morbid impulse which has once been felt or yielded to, is exceedingly powerful, and has already been incidentally mentioned in the present memoir.

When a living being performs an act under the operation of certain impressions which are received, there is a tendency to the performance of a similar act if like influences are brought to bear on the organism. Every time the act is performed, the disposition to repeat it becomes stronger, until at last the habit is so firmly established that the act is accomplished without the reception of impressions similar to those which originally gave rise to it, but solely through the force of the newly organized power. This disposition to repetition is not limited to physical acts, it prevails in regard to almost every function of the body and mind, to trains and modes of thought, and forms, often, an important element in the production of disease.

Habit, therefore, is periodicity, and may be defined as the disposition which the organism acquires from the frequent performance of certain acts to repeat these acts until some more powerful force intervenes.

Some persons are more under the influence of habit than others. They acquire a habit more quickly, and lose it with less facility. So strong are the unpleasant feelings excited by any interruption in the regular course of their habits, that they will endure the greatest inconveniences in order to indulge in them. I knew a gentleman whose custom it was to touch a certain tree on the road from his house to the railway station, a distance of about five miles, as he daily went to his place of business. On one occasion, through absence of mind, he neg-

lected this action, and rode several hundred yards before he discovered his omission. Though feeling annoyed he continued his journey; but the uncomfortable sensation became too strong for him to endure it longer, and after having ridden two miles past the tree, at the risk of missing the train he galloped back and touched it as usual.

There can be no doubt that morbid impulse is often continued, from the force of habit, long after the original excitation has been forgotten. I have adduced cases which, so far as could be ascertained, were instances of the kind, and I could readily cite, both from my own experience and that of others, many additional ones to the same effect. But the following must suffice :

A lady came under my observation who was subject to no delusion, and who had never given any evidence of mental alienation except in exhibiting an impulse, which she declared she could not control, to throw valuable articles into the fire. At first, as she said in her confession to me, the impulse was excited by the satisfaction she derived from seeing an old pair of slippers curl up into fantastic shapes after she had thrown them into a blazing wood fire. She repeated the act the following day, but not having a pair of old shoes to burn, she used instead a felt hat which was no longer fashionable. But this did not undergo contortions like the shoes, and therefore she had no pleasurable sensations like those of the day before, and thus, so far as any satisfaction was concerned, the experiment was a failure. On the ensuing day, however, she, to her great surprise, felt that it would be a pleasant thing to burn something. She was very clear that this pleasure consisted solely in the fulfilment of an impulse which, to a certain extent, had become habitual. She therefore seized a handsomely bound prayer-book which lay on the table, and throwing it into the fire, turned away her face and walked to another part of the room. It was very certain, therefore, that she was no longer gratified by the sight of the burning articles. She went on repeating this act with her own things, and even with those which did not belong to her, until she became a nuisance to herself and all those with whom she had any relations. Her destructive propensities stopped at nothing which was capable of being consumed; books, bonnets, shawls,

laces, handkerchiefs, and even table-covers and bed-linen helped to swell the list of her sacrifices. As soon as she had thrown the articles into the fire the impulse was satisfied. She did not care to see them burn; on the contrary, the sight was rather disagreeable to her than otherwise. But the force which affected her in the way it did, she represented as being imperative, and if not immediately allowed to act, giving rise to the most irritable and unpleasant sensations, which she could not describe otherwise than by saying that she felt as if she would have to fly, or to jump, or run, and that there was a feeling under the skin all over the body as if the flesh were in motion. As soon as she had yielded to the impulse these sensations disappeared. She was entirely cured, not by placing her in an asylum, but by subjecting her to such physical restraint as could readily be enforced within the precincts of her own home, and by the use of such medical remedies as were calculated to lessen the irritability of her nervous system.

In most of the different forms in which morbid impulse, manifests itself, the influence of habit is equally well shown. It is especially powerful in the species of mental aberration known as kleptomania.

Another influence in the causation of morbid influence not to be disregarded is *hereditary tendency*. It is well known that many affections of the nervous system are the result of this force; not that such diseases necessarily predispose to the transmission of similar disorders, but that they do tend to the propagation of some affection of the nervous organization. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the subjects of morbid impulse often have ancestors who have suffered from well-marked insanity, epilepsy, neuralgia, or other disease, the result of nervous derangement.

But it is not uncommon to find a particular morbid impulse transmitted in kind. This is especially true of the impulse to commit murder and suicide, and above all of the latter. Thus Cazauvieilh,¹ of eighty-one suicides, the cases of which form the basis of his work, found that there was hereditary tendency in thirteen.

¹ Du Suicide, etc. Paris, 1840, Tab. 1, p. 18.

The impulse to the abuse of alcoholic liquors is also often hereditary in kind, as many here to-night can testify from their own knowledge.

Relative to the cure of persons affected with morbid impulse, it is scarcely proper in a Society such as this to touch upon the medical treatment; but a few words relative to the moral management may not be out of place. It is certainly true that in many cases impressions stronger in their influence than the morbid impulse can be made upon the minds of the affected individuals, and that thus the impulse is subdued. Plutarch, in his "*Morals*," relates that the Milesian women, whose impulse to suicide has been already cited, and who were so strongly impelled to kill themselves that "neither the tears of father nor mother, nor reasons nor remonstrances nor the comfortable speeches of their friends were of any avail," but who were effectually restrained by the passage of a law, that if any one thereafter should hang herself, her naked body should be dragged through the market-place in view of the whole city, and he adds that the fear of dishonor, shame, and ignominy is of greater power than the fear of death, even though the disgrace takes place after life is extinct.

This law was made use of by the authorities of Marseilles to check the disposition manifested among the young women of that city to self-destruction, and with equally beneficial results.

The first Napoleon, whose knowledge of human nature has rarely been excelled, arrested an epidemic of suicide in his army by appealing to the ennobling emotions of the mind. A grenadier killed himself. This suicide was followed by another, and it was feared that, as in previous instances, the impulse would extend. Bonaparte at once appreciated the necessity for prompt action, and accordingly issued the following general order:

"The grenadier Groblin has committed suicide from a disappointment in love. He was in other respects a worthy man. This is the second event of this kind that has happened in this corps within a month. The first consul directs that it shall be notified in the order of the day of the guard, that a soldier ought to know how to overcome the grief and melancholy of his passions; that there is as much true courage in bearing mental affliction manfully as remaining unmoved under the fire of a battery. To abandon one's self to grief, without resisting, and to kill one's self in order to escape from it, is like abandoning the field of battle before being conquered."

The effect of this appeal was truly magical, and the disposition to suicide was at once checked.¹

The morbid impulse to injure others in property or person can be very often restrained by the efforts of the individual who experiences the impulse. Many instances of the kind have come under my observation, and they are frequently overcome by that wholesome fear of the law and the influence of judicious discipline, which even the insane, especially those whose only manifestation of mental aberration consists in morbid impulses, are generally capable of appreciating.

Dr. Carpenter quotes from the report of the Morningside Lunatic Asylum for 1850 a case which is so apposite in the present connection that I give it entire:²

“The case was that of a female who was not affected with any disorder of her intellectual powers, and who labored under no delusions or hallucinations, but who was tormented by a simple abstract desire to kill, or rather—for it took a specific form—to strangle. She made repeated attempts to effect her purpose, attacking all and severally even her own nieces and other relatives; indeed it seemed to be a matter of indifference to her whom she strangled so that she succeeded in killing some one. She recovered under strict discipline so much self-control as to be permitted to work in the washing house or laundry; but she still continued to assert that she ‘must do it;’ that she was ‘certain she would do it some day;’ ‘that she could not help it;’ that ‘surely no one had ever suffered as she had done;’ was not hers ‘an awful case;’ and approaching any one she would gently bring her hand near their throat, and say mildly and persuasively, ‘I would just like to do it.’ She frequently expressed the wish that all the men and women in the world had only one neck, that she might strangle it. Yet this female had a kind and amiable disposition, was beloved by her fellow-patients, so much so that one of them insisted on sleeping with her, although she herself declared that she was afraid she would not be able to resist the impulse to get up during the night and strangle her. She had been a very pious woman, exemplary in her conduct, very fond of attending prayer-meeting, and of visiting the sick, praying with them and reading the scriptures, or repeating to them the services she had heard. It was the second attack of insanity. During the former she had attempted suicide. The disease was hereditary, and it may be believed that she was strongly predisposed to morbid impulses of this character, when it was stated that her sister and mother had both committed suicide. There can be no

¹ Dr. Forbes Winslow's *Anatomy of Suicide*. London, 1840, p. 177.

² *Principles of Mental Philosophy*, etc. London, 1874, p. 664.

doubt as to the sincerity of her morbid desires. She was brought to the institution under very severe restraint, and the parties who brought her were under very great alarm upon the restraint being removed. After its removal she made repeated and very determined attacks upon the other patients, the attendants, and the officers of the asylum, and was only taught to exercise sufficient self-control by a system of rigid discipline. This female was perfectly aware that her impulses were wrong, and that if she had committed any crime of violence under their influence she would have been exposed to punishment. She deplored in piteous terms the horrible propensity under which she labored. In the report of the same institution for 1853, it is mentioned that this female had been readmitted after nearly succeeding in strangling her sister's child, under the prompting of her homicidal impulse. She displays no delusion or perversion of ideas, but is urged on by an abstract and uncontrollable impulse to do what she knows to be wrong and deeply deplores."

I have quoted this case for the purpose of showing by the testimony of a superintendent of a lunatic asylum, that even when the morbid impulse is overwhelmingly strong, the subject of it is controlled by discipline, and that, therefore, there are means of subduing the tendency to crime which such people manifest.

A morbid impulse may occasionally be overcome by turning the attention to some analogous but harmless occupation in which the impulse expends itself. Georget¹ cites the following case on the authority of Worbe :

"At midnight a man presented himself at the country-seat of the celebrated Antoine Petit, and begged him to cure him of an invincible propensity to kill his master, whom he had served for fifteen years. He added that he had also a strong impulse to kill himself. The idea had come to him very suddenly, and he could not overcome it. Petit received the man kindly, made him sit down, quieted his agitation, and gave him a glass of good wine. At early dawn, under the pretext of getting some remedies for him, he took him to Paris, and conducting him to a slaughter-house, made him cut the throats of several sheep. The man showed great delight at the proceeding, but at the seventh victim he suddenly turned pale and fell fainting to the ground. This man assumed the trade of a butcher, and on the first day of every year came to thank Petit for having saved him from the scaffold."

I once overcame a strong impulse to steal whatever she could

¹ Op. cit., p. 68.

lay her hands on, which a wealthy lady exhibited, by directing her mind to the subject of botany, and inducing her to make collections of plants. She gradually became so infatuated with the new pursuit that she lost all kleptomaniacal symptoms.

It is often the case that in women morbid impulses are purely hysterical. They are then to be managed accordingly.

The *legal relations* of morbid impulse are of vast importance to society. My own opinion in regard to the manner in which the law should deal with individuals thus affected will easily be ascertained from the incidental remarks already made in the course of this essay, but it may be well to state them more emphatically than has yet been done.

1st. A person aware of the existence of an impulse to commit crime, and which he fears he may not be able to resist, is bound to do everything in his power to render the accomplishment of his propensity impossible. It is his duty to immediately place himself under restraint. If he does not, he is morally and legally in no better position than a ruffian who feels an impulse to acquire other peoples' property and accordingly murders the man most convenient for his purpose.

2d. The individual who is clearly shown to have yielded to a *previously unfelt* impulse to commit crime, and who accordingly perpetrates an otherwise motiveless offence, or one which in his normal condition would evidently not have been committed, is too dangerous to society to be allowed to go at large. He ought to be placed under permanent restraint. I say *permanent*, because experience shows that this form of mental aberration is exceedingly apt to recur. Several of the cases I have cited are illustrations of crimes committed after the discharge from confinement, and there are hundreds of similar instances on record.

3d. Those morbidly constituted individuals who commit crimes because it is pleasant for them to do so, such as Hélène Jégado, Dumollard, Pomeroy, and others whose cases I have cited, should be treated exactly like other offenders against the laws. The absence of motive is apparent only. The fact that the criminal experiences pleasure from the committal of the act is as strong a motive as any other that can be alleged

and is entitled to no more extenuating force than the pleasure of revenge, or acquisitiveness, or other passions. "Lord, how I do love thieving!" said a London vagabond. "If I had all the riches of the world I would still be a thief."

4th. The fact that a murder has been committed, in order that the perpetrator might secure his own execution, is not a palliating circumstance. Those who contend that it is—and I am sorry to find Dr. Maudsley among them—seem to be actuated by the erroneous idea that suicide is necessarily the act of an insane person. The desire to be executed may be evidence of a morbid mind, but not necessarily of an insane one; and if we are going to excuse every crime committed by jaundiced and hypochondriacal and notoriety-loving people, we might as well close our courts at once.

5th. A morbid impulse to crime experienced by an insane person—and by insane person I mean one who exhibits other evidences of insanity besides the morbid impulse, and who would be considered by competent judges to be insane even if no such impulse existed—demands continued sequestration.

6th. But the plea, "*I could not help it*," is one which every member of the criminal classes can urge with as much force as the subject of morbid impulse, and when it stands alone in an otherwise sane individual, should be absolutely disregarded by juries and judges.

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ASSISTED BY

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